CHAPTER THREE
FALLEN WOMEN AND FALLEN ANGELS

In brief, a woman is nothing other than a devil in the likeness of a human form.

—Albertus Magnus

The body of a possessed person was thought to be inhabited by more than one identity, or spirit. Though her human spirit or personality still remained within her physical shell, it was subordinated by this more powerful, invading supernatural spirit. The possessed called themselves by new names: Mazzanto, Pen-in-ink,[1] or Holy Spirit. Their very aspect and appearance might be transformed: a bearded man, a grimacing mask. They uttered speech in the voice of their possessing spirit, adopting the personality of the indwelling entity.

As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, the speech of the possessed woman is not hers but is deferred to another entity. The lips and tongue that utter prophecies are physically that of the possessed woman, yet they are controlled, as in a marionette, by a spirit other than her own.[2] Thus spirit possession is most fundamentally and originally a disruption of identity: the possessed lack deictic integrity or stability. The term "deixis," which I have adopted from the vocabulary of rhetoric, refers to the proper use of demonstrative words and pronouns. Hence deixis targets the individual's ability to adopt a consistent point of view or subject position within language or, by extension, social and physical interaction. It is precisely this function that is

[1] J de V, 97; *Miracula S. Joannis Gualberti Abbatis*, *AASS*, July 2:417; and Jacques de Vitry, *Historia occidentalis*, ed. J. Hinnebusch (Fribourg, 1972), 86–87, respectively.

[2] I am playing on the French title of Michel de Certeau's article "La Parole de la Possedée," translated as "Discourse Disturbed: The Sorceror's Speech," in *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York, 1988), 244–68.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

disabled by spirit possession: the possessed cannot maintain her accustomed identity but is instead subdued by a foreign, invasive identity or spirit that controls her body and actions. She may switch identities, alternating between self and other and uttering words of her own and those of her possessing spirit in turn. Or her own identity may be entirely subverted and overwhelmed, as she wholly adopts the new personality and expressions of the indwelling spirit that controls her body. In either case, the state of spirit possession is most startlingly manifested to observers through a primal disruption of personal identity.

In this chapter I ask why women were held to be more vulnerable than men to this particular disruption of identity. The answer, I argue, is that medieval conceptions of the differences between male and female physiology constructed the female body—and with it, the female character—as fundamentally more changeable, more highly impressionable, and thus as more receptive to outside spiritual influences than the male. Women, in short, were considered to have a weaker claim to deictic integrity than men, a less sharply bounded self. This debility, in turn, rendered them more prone to spiritual influences and invasions. If, as I suggested in chapter 2, avoidance of spirit possession requires a vigilant "border control"—an ability to control the surface of the body and keep foreign spirits out—then vulnerability to spirit possession suggests that the victim's surface boundaries are especially permeable, frangible, or breachable in some way. This chapter investigates the issue of male and female bodily boundaries and their respective vulnerability to spiritual transgressions.

This set of ideas will be pursued through four different discursive realms that echo and reinforce one another. The following pages thus present a series of loosely interlinked analyses that build upon one another, even as they work through slightly different sets of problems. The intended effect should be like piecing together a mosaic, tile by tile, until a larger picture is built up from small fragments. The discussion begins with a brief overview of the etymologies that medieval writers offered for sex-specific words. This study reveals that women were associated with the qualities of softness, changeability, and malleability; men with strength, force, and virtue. Second, an examination of texts about the differences between male and female physiologies shows that women's bodies were regarded as more vulnerable to external influences than men's. The humoral composition of the female body constructed women both as more apt to enter dissociative states and as more receptive to outside impressions from foreign spirits. The third section of the chapter investigates a different coding of the same concept. By closely interrogating the medieval trope of the "open/porous" versus the "sealed/dense"

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

body, I explore how ideas about gender intersected with ideas about sinfulness and vulnerability to possession by various kinds of spirits. The final piece in the mosaic inverts the terms of inquiry, looking for images of the feminized demonic rather than of the demonized feminine. These diverse realms of discourse each in their own way established the feminine as inherently unstable, prone to dissociative or anomic states, and especially vulnerable to the depredations of exterior spirits.

GENDERED ETYMOLOGIES

Medieval etymologies offer a convenient point of entry into how medieval intellectuals understood the categories of male and female. Historians often employ a strategy of triangulation, in which a comparison between the symbolic associations of the same words, ideas, or gestures within different contexts lends nuance to their meanings overall. It is to our great advantage that in studying etymologies, the medieval sources have themselves already engaged in triangulation for us, demonstrating the assumptions that medieval intellectuals made about gender roles when explaining words for "woman" and for "man." Although no modern philologist would agree with the word derivations presented in these texts, such associations are deeply revelatory of fundamental medieval attitudes. Indeed, etymologies may be seen as a window onto a vista of cultural common sense, as defined by Clifford Geertz: "what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes."[3]

The derivations of words and names was an area of knowledge that medieval people themselves found fascinating. The book of *Etymologies* of the seventh-century bishop Isidore of Seville was a wildly popular text, one frequently recopied and referenced throughout the subsequent medieval centuries. Encyclopedias, bestiaries, and books of natural history often initiated discussions of new topics with short etymologies. By the thirteenth century, even compilations of saints' lives such as the *Golden Legend* began to include etymological meditations upon the names of the saints. In this culture that worshiped the divine word, a highly essentialist conception of the relationship between words and derivations, sign and significance, held sway. Etymologies were regarded as unveiling the central truth of a thing's character.

In proposing etymologies for sex-specific Latin words, medieval thinkers

[3] Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as Cultural System," *Antioch Review* 33 (1975): 16–17.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

associated positive and vigorous qualities with words for male, and they aligned negative, malleable qualities with words for female. The most commonly repeated discussion, found in many thirteenth-century encyclopedias and natural histories, runs thus:

> Man (*vir*) is so called because there is greater strength/virtue (*virtus*) in him than in women. It is for that reason that he takes the name, or because he acts with strength/virtue in his relationship with woman. Woman (*mulier*) however, gets her name from her weakness (*mollicia*), for she is "weaker" (*mollier*) with the letter "l" removed or changed, giving "woman."[4]

The phrase "weaker sex" derived from this etymology for the word *mulier* from *mollier*, an idea transmitted to medieval thinkers by Isidore and endlessly repeated for generations thereafter. Isidore probably took the idea from the fourth-century theologian Lactantius, who in turn ascribes it to Varro; but it is Isidore's name that is invoked continually by later medieval authors. While woman was associated with weakness and softness, *vir*, by contrast, was associated with *virtus*. This adjective has an exceptionally broad range of exalted connotations including strength, vital force, power, virtue, and righteousness. Indeed, this sense of physical power combined with moral virtue and physical vitality is one reason why *virtus* was a particular characteristic of the saints, aptly demonstrating the emphatically positive connotations of the word.[5]

Women's malleability, weakness, and softness made them easily fall under the sway of external persuasions and spiritual influences. These adjectives construct a gender role for women that centers on the idea of personal instability: the soft, weak, and malleable woman receives an imprint more easily, and is quickly remolded to new habits and ends, whether for good or ill. These qualities were further exaggerated, and viewed in more exclusively negative terms, when the diminutive suffix *-cula* was added, to the word *mulier*, producing *muliercula*. This term was the overwhelmingly preferred form employed in discussions of laywomen visionaries: it carries the additional negative valences of foolishness and lack of discretion. I translate it as "silly woman," and the reader will see this phrase often. Significantly, a cor-

[4] The Aberdeen Bestiary. http://www.clues.abdn.ac.uk:8080/besttest/alt/translat/trans92r.html. See also *RP* 6.12, 145. The medieval *fons et origo* is Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiarum libri XX* 11.2.18, in *PL*, 82:417. Compound translations are meant to convey the full range of associations of the words.

[5] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981); André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Middle Ages*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 1997), 427–44.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

responding diminutive form of *vir* does not exist. The common medieval Latin words for aged persons display a similar disparity: while the word for old man, *vetus*, is simply a masculine substantive adjective, the word for old woman adds a diminutive ending, forming the inherently derogatory *vetula*. This term, in the course of the later Middle Ages, acquired increasingly sinister and superstitious connotations, culminating in an intimate association with witchcraft at the end of the period. As Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani have noted, the *vetula* "is placed at the intersection of femininity, advanced age, and simplicity; she extends these three qualities of the human condition to their point of incandescence, or rather the incandescence of their negativity."[6] In sum, the etymologies for words associated with men defined them as essentially moral and honorable, suited both for rule and for saintly virtue. Women, by comparison, were defined as lacking a strong sense of self and of right and wrong, a fact that made them more easily manipulable by either beneficent or maleficent forces.

Women also were thought to be the more carnal sex in the Middle Ages.[7] Debilitated by sexual urges, women's limited moral judgment and rational capabilities were easily overwhelmed by desire. The suggested derivations for another Latin word for woman, *femina*, underscore this point. According to the same text quoted above, "We get the word *femina* . . . from those parts of the thighs (*femorum*) by which this sex is distinguished from the man. Others think that *femina* derives by Greek etymology, from the phrase 'fiery force,' because a woman lusts fiercely; for females are more lustful than males, among women as among animals."[8] Given these associations between women and the sin of lust, it is hardly surprising that later the *Malleus maleficarum* would derive *femina* from a compound of *fe* (faith) and *minus* (lesser), "since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith."[9] Although this particular etymology does not appear until the fifteenth century, the sentiment it expresses about female weakness and lack of moral sense is fully in accord with the content of the late medieval tradition.

[6] Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, "Savoir médical et anthropologie religieuse: Les représentations et les fonctions de la *vetula* (XIIIe–XVe siècle)," *Annales E.S.C.* 48, 5 (1993): 1281–308.

[7] For a theological history, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988). For a psychohistorical approach, Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999).

[8] Aberdeen Bestiary. See Isidorus, *Etymologiarum libri* 11.2.24, in *PL*, 82:417.

[9] Henry Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum* (Lyons, 1669), 43. Modern scholarship ascribes the entire work to Kramer alone, but in citations I list both names in accordance with bibliographical convention.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

The thirteenth-century Franciscan Bartholomew the Englishman, in his wildly popular natural encyclopedia *On the Properties of Things*, offers an etymology for the word *puella* (girl), that likewise emphasizes female susceptibility to exterior influences. This vulnerability is not without some positive effects, though ultimately it renders women the less capable sex. Bartholomew oscillates ambivalently between positive and negative traits:

> "Girl" (*puella*) is from "pure" (*pura*) and "minor" (*pupilla*), as Isidore says, because of all the things that are valued in a girl, modesty is valued most. . . . Because a woman is of greater piety than a man, she more quickly gives forth tears. She is greater in hatred and she loves more. Wickedness of the soul is greater in woman than in man, and she is weaker in hope and better at lies and immodesty. She is more sluggish and slower of movement.[10]

Thus the female nature is inherently more labile and impressionable. Her greater piety moves her to quicker identification with suffering, causing her to "more quickly give forth tears"—one of the classic possessed behaviors. Yet despite this inherent religiosity, the female also is more susceptible to evil influences and spiteful behavior as well. Bartholomew constructs the feminine as caught between competing poles of piety and wickedness, love and hate, tears and lies. These contrary impulses effectively portray her as more strongly moved by external influences than the masculine. The girl Bartholomew describes is fundamentally impulsive, quickly breaking into tears, emotionally passionate, and abandoned to the influences of the moment. Whether good or bad, the female is excessive in her responses to things, for she is led by a sensual nature.

Again, there is a striking contrast between this etymology and those designating males. "Male" terms tended to be associated with rationality, with intellect, and with spirit, as opposed to the more material and carnal nature associated with women. When, a few pages later, Bartholomew turns to the word *masculus*, the contrast with *puella* is marked. Invoking Isidore along with a host of other pedigreed authorities, Bartholomew expands on his view of sex differences:

> Man (*masculus*) is said to be a diminutive of male (*mas*), which (as Isidore says) occupies preeminence in terms of the worthiness of the sexes in all kinds of animals. The male is superior to the female in terms of com-

[10] *RP* 6.7, 141. See Isidorus, *Etymologiarum libri* 11.2.12, 416.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

plexion, in terms of work, in terms of common sense (*sensus discretionum*), and in terms of power and dominance. . . . In every species of animal, the male has a more careful and adept mind than the female for guarding against insidious snares and in avoiding harmful things (as Aristotle says in book five). For this reason the man excels the woman in rationality and in the sharpness of his intellect (as Augustine says). The man is above the woman (according to the Apostle) because of his honor and his figuration of the divine image, and on account of this honor the man is exalted in authority and power.[11]

Bartholomew adds another layer to the series of gender associations I have been tracing. Joined to his enumeration of the now familiar litany of positive, male-oriented adjectives (including, here, "preeminent," "worthy," "power[ful]," "dominan[t]," "honor[ed]," and "exalted") is the idea that male prudence and rationality render him naturally more adept at avoiding evil than the female. He is better able to avoid "insidious snares" (*insidiis*), a word with strong demonic overtones, and "harmful things" such as moral and physical dangers. He is above the woman both socially and morally by virtue of his physical sex alone; even male animals possess this preeminence, which is simply the natural order of all existence. The diminutive suffix of *masculus* does not add negative valences to the word, as it does in the case of the feminine terms *muliercula* and *vetula.* The female physical constitution, by contrast, is more susceptible to evil temptations precisely because of her motility. She is easily manipulated by others because she lacks a firm rational identity.

The most instructive medieval debate about word meanings, however, concerns the more neutral term *homo*, best translated either as "human being" or as "person." *Homo*, of course, is the term used in the Latin vulgate for that which is *imago Dei*, the image of God. A series of vigorous medieval debates centered on whether the term *homo* referred to men alone or to the whole of humanity. If women were included in *homo* then they, as well as men, must be considered in God's image; if the term was exclusive of women, then they did not share an image with the divine. As early as 585, Gregory of Tours reports that a council of bishops assembled in Macon considered the issue after one of their number raised the question and argued for a definition of *homo* limited to men.[12] Although the Council ultimately decided that *homo*

[11] *RP* 6.12, 144. Isidorus, *Etymologiarum libri* 9.7.2, 363; he links *mas* to *maritus* and *masculus.*

[12] Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 8.20, trans. L. Thorpe (New York, 1974), 452. It should be noted, however, that Gregory may have been trying to impugn the character of the bishop concerned.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

included both sexes, echoes of this debate persisted, with respected authorities arguing both sides of the issue throughout the Middle Ages.[13] The famed twelfth-century canonist Gratian, for example, wrote that a woman ought to keep her head covered in Church (1 Cor. 11:7) precisely because she was *not* in the image of God.[14] The veiling of the female head was a symbol of her subordination before God and His image and representatives, men. The bared male head, by contrast, demonstrated his dignity and physical perfection as the divine image. Thirteenth-century theologians continued to struggle with the *imago Dei* problem, mainly because being in the image of God was held to be a prerequisite for the priesthood.

On one end of the spectrum are writers like Bartholomew the Englishman who, in the final sentence of the passage quoted above, uses the male figuration of God to legitimate his social and political preeminence. The thirteenth-century Dominican Vincent of Beauvais, another quite popular and influential encyclopedist, went even further in categorically denying that women could be in the image of God. Woman was "said to be the glory of man, not the image of God."[15] Vincent goes on to present a startlingly circular argument: women are subjected to men because of their lack of divine image; yet women cannot bear the divine image because they are subject: "She is not Lady of all" as God is Lord of all, and as man holds dominion over creatures. She is, then, naturally ruled by the man. Furthermore, another result of her lack of the divine image is that "she, not the man, was seduced by the devil." This detail is significant: to be in the image of God is to enjoy a special kind of protection against demonic aggression, as we shall see.

Writers like Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Alexander of Hales, by contrast, hesitated to exclude women altogether from the divine image. Yet this created a conflict, for they wished to preserve the priesthood as an exclusively masculine prerogative, and in their writings they linked the *imago Dei* problem to clerical prerogatives. This group of writers thus made a distinction between body and soul that helped them both to assert male and female similarities in terms of being in God's image and to preserve enough differences to reserve the priesthood for men alone. Arguing that the *soul* is sexless, they concluded that both men and women were in the image of God as regards

[13] For a later sequel to this debate, Manfred Fleischer, "Are Women Human? The Debate of 1595 between Valens Acidalius and Simon Gedicus," *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 12, 2 (1981): 107–21.

[14] Gratian, *Decretum* 33.8.19, cited in A. Minnis, "*De impedimento sexus:* Women's Bodies and Medieval Impediments to Female Ordination," in P. Biller and A. Minnis, eds., *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body* (Suffolk, 1997), 116.

[15] This and the following quotations in this paragraph are from *Spec. Nat.*, 1654.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

their souls. In particular, the capacity to reason—however weak in women—was held to be the signifying factor in the soul's similitude to God. However, as regards the *body*, only adult males were in the image of God, because they were reflections of the male Christ and able to reenact His originary priesthood at mass. The female body, as well as an immature male body, could not constitute an appropriate *signum* for Christ.[16] Indeed, Leo Steinberg has remarked upon the increasing emphasis placed on Christ's penis in the art of the late Middle Ages, as a means of demonstrating his fully human—and, not coincidentally, his definitively male—nature.[17] If to be in Christ's physical image required male anatomy, then one side effect of this trend, of course, was to emphasize female difference from the body of Christ. Women were included in the word *homo*, but nevertheless were only halfway, so to speak, *in imagine Dei*. And to the degree that female anatomy was distanced from the image of God, it could become—in an oppositional universe of good and evil—an image of the demonic.

This idea is neatly encapsulated in a fourteenth-century fresco inside the Church of San Petronius in Bologna (fig. 7). The painting presents a dense set of figural relationships: between the Fall and the Redemption, between the Tree of Knowledge and the "Tree" of the cross, and between Old Testament patriarchs and New Testament figures. Most interesting for our purposes, however, are the parallelisms that are established between Adam and Eve and other figures. Adam is closely aligned with Jesus: indeed, this was a traditional association first made by Paul, who refers to this pair as the "first man Adam," and the "last man Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45–49), in order to emphasize Christ's re-creation of human nature through his redemptive sacri-

[16] Minnis, "*De impedimento sexus*"; Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 388–89; Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, inq. 4, tract 1, sec. 1, quaest. 3, tit. 1, 340, ed. P. Bonaventura Marrani (Florence, 1928), 412–13.

[17] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York, 1983). It is true, as Caroline Bynum has argued, that certain symbolic chains of association could lead to a reading of Christ's *substance* as feminine. Medieval reproductive theory after the thirteenth century held that the mother of a child provided the matter or raw material for the new life, while the father provided the generative force or active "seed." Given this distinction between the respective contributions of each parent, one could view Christ's matter—derived from his mother Mary—as fundamentally "female" in some way. However, since all fleshly matter was viewed as transmitted to children from mothers, Christ would be no different from any other human being, male or female, in this respect. One could, then, argue that *all* males were somehow composed of "female" flesh inherited from their mothers. Yet it is questionable whether medieval theorists viewed flesh as fundamentally gendered on this "molecular" level, so to speak. Taking precedence over such a conception, I would suggest, would be the fact that Christ's actual form—the way his flesh was organized—was male.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

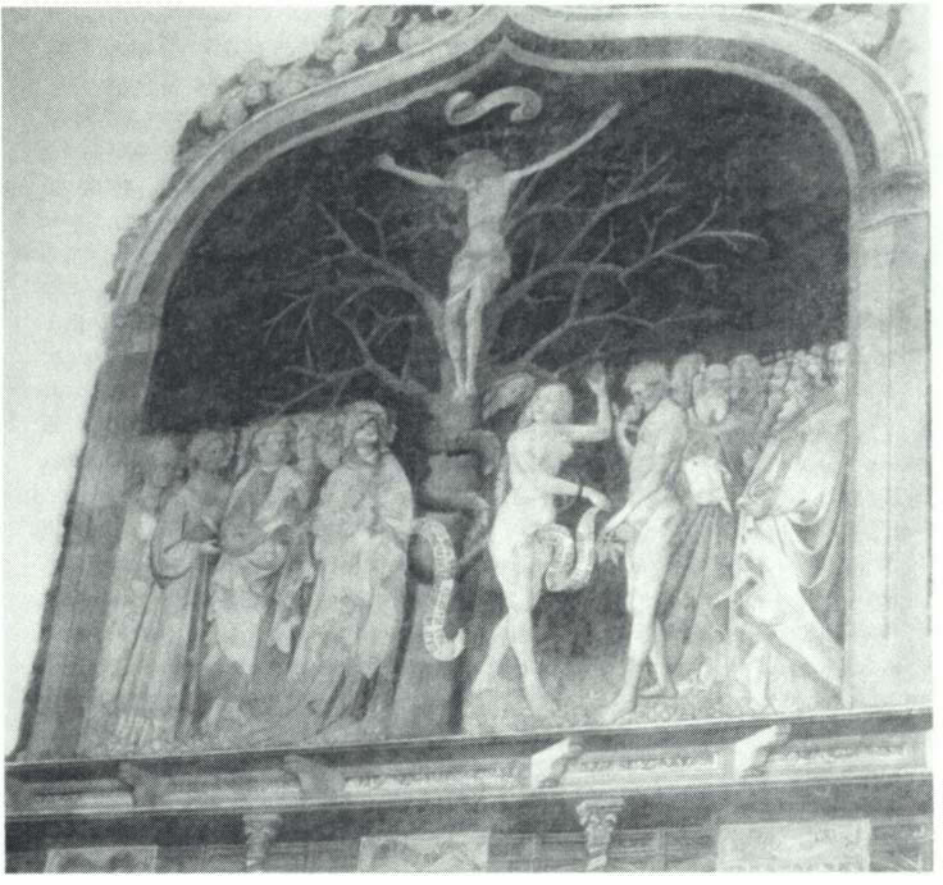

Figure 7. The images of God and of the devil. This fresco establishes a dense set of connections between Adam and Eve's fall from grace after eating of the forbidden tree, and Christ's redemptive death on the "tree" of the cross. Note that the head of the serpent is that of a human woman quite similar in appearance to Eve. Fresco by Giovanni da Modena, c. 1420. Bologna: Church of San Petronius. Photo by Richard S. Cohen.

fice. Adam thus both historically prefigures, and is created in the image of, the God-Christ. The two nude males at the central axis of the painting thus are perfect, recursive images of one another: Adam is in Christ's image, and He in turn is in Adam's image. Eve, however, resembles no one in the picture so much as the devil: she gazes into the smiling face of the serpent to whom she succumbs as if into a mirror. They are twinned: both have lush, wavy blond hair, smooth foreheads, and delicate features. However, beneath the tempter's skillfully made-up face lie the green, scaly coils of a snake. The-

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

ologically, of course, the painting also juxtaposes Eve with the figure of Mary, who is standing on the other side of the tree and who often was regarded as the woman who brought salvation to the postlapsarian world engendered by Eve's trespass. Insofar as Eve's physical form exists in the image of something else, however, it is an *imago diaboli*, of the devil whose visage lies so near to hers. The iconography of the female-headed serpent had become increasingly popular since the thirteenth century: such a motif also is found, for example, in the portals of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris.[18]

Anything that existed in the image of God had resistance to demons. Thus medieval theologians and preachers regularly asserted that the human soul, of either sex, was off-limits to demonic invasion: "when it is said that a devil is inside a person, we must not understand this to mean the soul."[19] This invulnerability of the soul to demonic infiltration is, of course, intimately related to its sacrosanct status as an image of God: demons would not dare to try to enter that which bears the imprint and likeness of the Omnipotent. Thus anything *in imagine Dei* possesses the apotropaic quality of warding off demonic attack. The implications of this position are clear: if, as Aquinas and others argued, the souls of men and women were equally images of God, then the souls of both sexes were equally resistant to demons. In the case of the body, however, there was a distinction between the two sexes. A man's physical participation in the image of God constructed his body as more fully resistant to the physical invasions of unclean spirits than the female body. Vincent of Beauvais, as noted above, directly attributed the Fall to Eve's lack of the divine image and her consequent vulnerability to demonic persuasion; Bartholomew the Englishman advanced much the same idea in his *On the Properties of Things*. Lacking the physical image of God, the female body lay open and defenseless against demonic invasion. Though it certainly is true that adult men sometimes were believed to be physically possessed by demons, their relative scarcity among demoniacs may be attributable, in part, to the prevalence of broad symbolic associations such as these, which were transmitted throughout all levels of culture through popular media such as natural encyclopedias and preaching. Since women's bodies did not possess the imprint and image of the divine, demons had little to fear from entering them. Unclean spirits could transgress, boldly, into female bodily space, possessing their physical territory and stopping short only at the borders of the soul.

[18] See Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol. Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, 1989).

[19] *DM*, 1:293.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

SEXED BODIES

The discussion of etymologies already has begun to shade into a discussion of male and female bodies.[20] If the female body was not in the image of God, then the physical differences between men and women were of paramount importance for understanding the ordering of Creation. The notion that the word *homo* did not include women in their physical existence raised questions about where to place women's bodies in the scheme of nature. The fact that women's bodies were not in the image of God subtly suggested that women were not as fully human as men. Yet women could not be considered nonhuman—or could they?

In the thirteenth century, theologians and natural philosophers did question whether women were part of the human species, or whether they belonged to some other taxonomic group. The question, while linked to the issues surrounding the word *homo*, arose more directly from a passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which had recently been made available to the West in Latin translation.[21] The Philosopher wondered how man and woman can form a single species, given the vast differences between them. The logic of the inquiry ran as follows: If contrariety establishes taxonomic classifications of species, and if woman is the opposite of man, then is not woman a separate species?

Medieval thinkers, following Aristotle himself, answered in the negative:

[20] The following discussion draws upon Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993); Prudence Allen, *Concept of Woman*; Nancy Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils* (Princeton, N.J., 1981); idem, *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Chicago, 1990); John Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago, 1994); Luis García-Ballester et al., eds., *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death* (Cambridge, 1994); Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Morris (New Brunswick, N.J., 1990); Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, *Les consilia médicaux* (Louvain, 1994); Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. M. Anderson (Princeton, N.J., 1988); M. Hewson, *Giles of Rome and the Medieval Theory of Conception* (London, 1975); Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Le corps en Chrétienté," in *Le corps, les rites, les rêves, le temps: Essais d'anthropologie médiévale* (Paris, 2001), 344–59; Michel Tarayre, "Le sang dans le *Speculum Majus* de Vincent de Beauvais: De la science aux *miracula*," in M. Faure, ed., *Le sang au Moyen Âge: Actes du quatrième colloque international de Montpellier, Université Paul-Valéry (27–29 novembre 1997)* (Montpellier, 1999), 343–59. While not of direct relevance, I also have benefited from the works of David Gentilcore, particularly *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto* (Manchester, 1992) and "Contesting Illness in Early Modern Naples: Miracolati, Physicians, and the Congregation of Rites," *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 117–48.

[21] Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 361.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

woman is *not* a distinct species, despite her distance from the male paradigm of fully realized humanity.[22] Even though women are the opposite of men, they both still belong to a single species. The broader significance of posing such a question, however, lies in the assumption that the fundamental differences between the sexes very nearly override their natural similarities. The thirteenth century, in fact, saw the gradual substitution of a highly polarized (Aristotelian) model of sex differences in place of the more complementary (Galenic) model that had prevailed in earlier centuries. I shall not rehearse this change in depth here, as it already has received excellent treatment from the pen of Joan Cadden.[23] It is worth noting, however, that this new emphasis on sex differences was viewed from within a hierarchical framework, which perceived woman's differences from man as inferiority. In turn, this widening gulf between men and women also implied a wider distance between women and God, in whose image man alone existed.

Female physiology was said to be inferior to the male in several important ways: in terms of reproduction, in terms of form or shape, and in terms of humoral balance or "complexion." The latter issue is of considerable complexity and importance for our investigation into why women were more vulnerable to spirit possession, but a brief sketch of the first two issues will help to clarify the broader context of gender imbalance in thirteenth-century medical thought. According to newly influential, Aristotelian ideas about conception circulating at this time, the female provided the raw matter for the generation of the fetus and the male, the active seed or form. Thus the woman's role was to be a passive receptacle and nourisher of the male seed, which provided all the vital force required for reproduction. These notions harmonized well with the ancient opposition between female "softness" and male "vital strength." Yet a problem arose in this system: the prevailing Aristotelian logic held that like reproduces like. Since it was the male who provided the active principle of generation, his active form should only reproduce something like itself: a male. Why, then, did the male seed sometimes produce a female infant? The resolution of this conundrum was dictated by the original, teleological terms of inquiry: males will reproduce males *if* the seed develops perfectly. This logic demanded, then, that female births be placed in the same category as deformities: the female infant is a male manqué who failed to develop in the expected way. In an immortal phrase derived from Aristotle and repeated by thinkers such as Albertus, his

[22] See ibid., 362–64; 389–90. Albertus Magnus, *Questiones super de animalibus* 15.3, ed. Ephrem Filthaut, in *Alberti Magni Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Episcopi Opera Omnia*, vol. 12 (Aschendorff, 1955), 261.

[23] Cadden, *Sex Differences;* Allen, *Concept of Woman.*

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

student Aquinas, and Bonaventure, woman is a *mas occasionatus:* a "misbegotten" or "deformed" male.

The phrase strikes many modern readers as excessive, and it should be noted that medieval thinkers placed limits upon its implications. Aquinas and others advanced a double viewpoint: though the generation of female offspring was in individual instances a failure of the male seed to reproduce itself perfectly, from the broader viewpoint of nature itself the generation of females as well as males was a more perfect ordering. Indeed, the creation account in the book of Genesis would definitively preclude considering all females as a defect of nature *strictu sensu,* since God Himself brought them into being. The highly formalistic mode of scholastic argumentation permitted the presentation of this dual viewpoint, effectively undercutting any absolutist definition of females as unnatural or monstrous. Yet as one scholar has noted, delicately, the idea of the female as a defective male, "when entertained in less formal contexts, projected a derogatory notion of the feminine."[24]

If the "misbegotten" woman lacked the appropriate corporeal form to act as a sign of Christ and image of God, so, too, was her physiology distinct from the male on what we might call the molecular, and medieval people the elemental, level. The elaborate medieval theories of elements, humors, complexion, and temperament have significant implications for the question of why women were viewed as more vulnerable to spirit possession than men.[25] In order to arrive at the point where these implications become clear, however, some background information on the components of this all-encompassing macro- and microcosmic system is required.

According to medieval theories of materialism, all of creation was formed from the four universal elements of fire, air, water, and earth. These were arranged in a hierarchy of descending nobility, with the more immaterial elements (first fire and then air) taking priority over those of grosser substance (water and, lastly, earth). Regardless of sex, all four elements were present in the composition of the human body, though in varying proportions. In medical terms, the four universal elements were said to be carried by the four humors, or physiological fluids: yellow bile (in which the element fire was dominant), blood (dominated by air), phlegm (primarily water), and black bile (mostly earth). The balance of the four humors within the body was determined partly by sex, with males usually being dominated by yellow bile and blood, and a little phlegm and black bile; and women characterized by a

[24] Cadden, *Sex Differences,* 195.

[25] *RP* 4.6–11, 99–114, gives an exemplary exposition of the humors and temperaments.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

high admixture of phlegm and black bile, and secondarily blood and yellow bile. This understanding of physiological sex differences was augmented by various bits of close observation and argument. Menstruation, for example, was advanced as proof that the female body was unable to absorb or process as much blood as the male body; and the thick quality of menstruum was attributed to its debasement through admixture of women's overabundant phlegm.[26]

To translate the language of humors back to the hierarchically ranked language of the elements, this system aligned women with the "grosser" elements of water and secondarily earth; and men with the "nobler" elements of fire and secondarily air. Such facts alone are not surprising. Discussion of the elements and humors becomes more intriguing, however, when another layer of the fourfold system is added: the medieval concept of complexion. Each bodily humor or fluid was aligned, not only with a particular element in the chain of universal matter, but also with a set of four physical qualities: hot, cold, moist, and dry. Thus yellow bile, containing fire, was primarily hot and secondarily dry. Blood, dominated by air, was primarily moist and secondarily hot. Phlegm, which was mostly water, was primarily cold and secondarily moist. Lastly, black bile, containing earth, was primarily dry and secondarily cold. The balance of the four humors resulted in a particular combination of the four qualities, and the resulting admixture was known as the individual's complexion. Thus the masculine complexion was primarily hot and dry, while the feminine complexion was primarily cold and moist: they are opposites. The quality of temperature was of singular importance, for the masculine complexion was dominated by two "hot" humors, while the feminine complexion was dominated by the two "cold" humors, a point to which I shall return below.

Finally, individual complexions corresponded to differing personality types, or "temperaments." The typical female temperament types were the "phlegmatic" and the "melancholic," as opposed to the typical male personality types, which were the "choleric" and the "sanguine." The phlegmatic personality was essentially sleepy, sluggish, and dull, while melancholics were described as self-centered and prone to hysterical delusions. (The latter personality type, interestingly, was held to be particularly characteristic not only of women but of Jews, who also were physiologically parallel to women through the medieval belief that Jewish men were subject to various bloody fluxes assimilated to menstruation.)[27] As for the male personality types, cho-

[26] Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus* 3.22, 135–36.

[27] Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, in H. Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A*

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

lerics were highly energetic and volatile, while the sanguine type was described as cheerful and generous. In sum, the chain of reasoning from elements to humors to complexions to temperaments was one of increasing gender imbalance. Moreover, this imbalance was conceived in ways that directly echo the associations of the words *vir* and *mulier:* the male types are vital, forceful, and strong; the female types are soft, foolish, and dull.

The concept of masculine and feminine complexions was used to instantiate three ideas about women that are of relevance for an understanding of women's perceived vulnerability to spiritual influences. First, feminine coldness was associated with a lack of moral constancy. Second, cool and moist humors occasioned a melancholy temperament, which was held to be highly impressionable. Third, coolness was associated with a greater need for physical purgation, and this in turn engendered an association between cool bodies and the surface quality of "openness" or "porosity." I shall briefly discuss the first two points here and devote a new chapter section to unpacking the third.

To begin, then, coolness was a predictive sign for moral instability. For it was heat that gave rise to masculine *virtus:* heat was the very basis of the vigor, force, and virtue that characterized the virile sex. Indeed, contemporary theories of sex determination held that the warmer the uterine environment, the more likely the gestation of a male child. A variant held that the degree of heat of the male "seed" in conception determined sex, again with more heat being conducive to a male child.[28] The minimal amount of humoral heat present in the typical female complexion emphasized her distance from the exuberant vitality and natural morality of the warmer male. Indeed, the warmest female was said to still be cooler than the coolest male.[29]

Thus Albertus Magnus, having discussed the elements and humors in his *Questions on Animals*, asks whether men are better able to learn moral behavior than women. The answer: yes, "because the coldness of complexion in the woman diminishes her perceptive abilities . . . and in consequence she is of weaker intellect." In the next paragraph, responding to an objection that some might consider women to be more prudent than men, he peevishly explains,

> The woman is not more *prudent* than the man, properly speaking, but more *cunning*. For prudence tends toward the good, and cunning toward

---

Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum *with Commentaries* (Albany, 1992), 74. See Willis Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menstruation," *Journal of Medieval History* 24 (1998): 273–95.

[28] Cadden, *Sex Differences*, 117–34.

[29] Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus* 15.6, 262–63.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

evil. For the woman is more "prudent"—that is, more cunning—in evil and perverse deeds than the man, since to the degree that her nature is deficient toward one thing, so much is it directed toward another. And so since the woman is deficient in intellectual operations, which consist in the understanding of good, and the grasp of truth, and fleeing from evil, she therefore is more directed toward the sensual appetites, which tend toward evil. . . . Hence the senses move woman to every evil, just as the intellect moves man to every good.[30]

Thus coldness renders women intellectually weak, and this leads to a correspondingly greater strength in her sensory attachments. The result of this situation is a mental inability to grasp truth and goodness, combined with a proclivity for sensory indulgences—that is, sin. In man the situation is, of course, reversed. His vital heat begets virile *virtus* and righteousness. Thus women, being fundamentally the weaker, and hence the more sensual sex, also present an easier target for demonic illusion and attack.

If feminine coolness begets irrationality and therefore sensual perversity, feminine moistness engenders other ruinous qualities. Moistness begets a changeable, inconstant, and highly impressionable nature, like mud retaining a footprint. (Women were, after all, composed primarily of the elements earth and water.) Albertus states:

The complexion of the woman is more moist than the man's, and moistness receives an impression easily, but retains it poorly. A moist thing is easily influenced, and therefore women are inconstant and are always looking for novelties. . . . Hence there is no faith in a woman.

Believe me! If you believe her, she will deceive you;
Believe an experienced master.[31]

Indeed, women are so itching for novelty, according to Albertus, they will not hesitate to gain their desires "through lies and diabolic deceptions" if necessary.[32] Their cool and moist complexions make them more susceptible to sinful external influences and impressions than men, and thus lead them to seek new stimuli at any cost.

These flighty fancies may well take the form of excessive religious devotions and self-deceptions, Albertus warned. The teacher of Aquinas derided

[30] Ibid. 15.11: 266.
[31] Ibid., 265.
[32] Ibid., 266.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

women's delusive pursuit of supernatural gifts. In his sermons, he denigrated the religious aspirations of contemporary laywomen, comparing them unfavorably to the Magdalene: "She did not do as many women do, who always want to be exalted on high and amidst supernatural occurrences (*in mirabilibus*) that are above them. They want to be surrounded by visions and by things of a sort that they cannot possibly attain."[33] When Albertus heard of a woman who claimed to have nursed the infant Jesus in a visionary trance, he termed it an "idiocy."[34]

My point is not simply that these complexion types served to legitimize female inferiority by providing a naturalized explanation for already existing gender roles, however. It is, rather, to observe the precise form this inequality takes, and the relationship it bears to spirit possession and the discernment of spirits. It is noteworthy, for example, that the description of women as cold and moist constructs them not only as dull-witted and changeable but also—and here I reach my second point—as quick to receive an imprint, easily influenced and persuaded. There is a sense in these passages that women do not have a stable identity in the same way that men do: they have no strong convictions, opinions, or preferences, but are easily impelled in any direction by outside forces. They are fundamentally malleable—*mollier*, after all. Women lack a strong inner core of unchanging identity or a stable positioning deixis, a presupposition that goes to the heart of the perception that women were more readily subdued by foreign spiritual entities.

Indeed, the notion that "moistness receives an impression easily" explicitly was extended to the depredations of spirits, both good and bad, into women's moist bodies. Women's diminished strength of self or subjectivity vis-à-vis men led to a conception of the female constitution as more open to exterior spiritual influences of all kinds. This is true both because of their impressionable nature and because of their characteristic temperament. Thus although Albertus Magnus used the principle of feminine impressionability to advance a case for feminine sinfulness, other authors were more measured. For example William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris in the early thirteenth century, notes:

> Many visions and phantastic apparitions are produced in many people from a melancholy disposition, but primarily in women, as you can see even in the case of true visions and revelations. And the doctors say that

[33] J. Schneyer, "Predigten Alberts des Grossen in der HS. Leipzig, Univ. Bibl. 683," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 34 (1964): 45–68.

[34] Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), 337 n. 87.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

this is due in particular to the nature of feminine souls, for they are easier to make an impression on than masculine souls, even at a distance.[35]

William suggests that women's impressionable nature can lead them to either of two extremes. On the one hand, their melancholy temperaments, arising from the dominance of black bile in their humoral makeup, made them prone to phantasies and illusions. The larger context of William's remark is a discussion of popular beliefs and errors, such as those of old women who report their own entranced, shamanistic flights with the nighttime ladies or "good things."[36] William regarded such beliefs as fundamentally diabolic impressions, misguided and delusory. Indeed, William already had explained the effects of demonic possession as derived from various kinds of spiritual impressions made on the soul or the "perceptive faculties."[37] On the other hand, the special receptivity of women to spiritual impressions also could work to their advantage, since it rendered them generally more receptive to good spiritual influences, "as we see even in the case of true visions and revelations." Thus women could also receive divine or angelic impressions more readily than men. This notion persisted two centuries later, when Johannes Nider quoted this passage of William's, word for word, in his *Formicarius*.[38] The same notion appears in the *Malleus maleficarum*, which notes that women, "because of the motility of their complexions, are easier to impress with revelations brought to bear by the impressions of disembodied (*separatorum*) spirits. Indeed, because of women's complexion, when they are used well, many good things result; but when used for evil, they are the worst."[39]

Phrased differently, we might say that the more imperfect female complexion meant that women could easily be dominated by invading, foreign spirits. They could be used by spirits as tools and vessels. Male vitality, by contrast, made them more resistant to spiritual encroachment. The male

[35] William of Auvergne, *De universo*, in *Guillelmi Alverni Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1674; reprint, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1963), 1:1066.

[36] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. J. Tedeschi and A. Tedeschi (New York, 1986); idem, *Ecstacies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. R. Rosenthal (New York, 1991), 89–121; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants: Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris, 1994), 115–46; Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 23–24, 78–81; W. Peuckert, *Deutscher Volksglaube des Spatmittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1942), 86–96; Walter Liungmann, *Traditionswanderungen Euphrat–Rhein: Studien zur Geschichte der Volksbrauche* (Helsinki, 1938); Karl Meisen, *Die Sagen vom witenden Heer und wilder Jager* (Munster, 1938). See also the works cited in note 61.

[37] William of Auvergne, *De universo*, 1040–41.

[38] *F* 5.10, 85v.

[39] Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum*, 42.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

body was more difficult for any foreign spirit—even a good spirit—to overpower and control. Whereas the male in the image of God retains his deictic integrity, the unstable female is continually vulnerable to the suasions of other, invading spirits or identities.

As a corollary to this principle, we might note the degree to which female physiology was believed to predispose women to fantasy states and self-delusion. Vincent of Beauvais, for example, wrote that cold-complected individuals—who were, of course, most likely to be female—were prone to trances and fantasies that temporarily deprived them of thought and memory. "This habit is called 'alienation of the mind,' and it certainly either enfeebles them or brings about harm."[40] Thus the predominance of women among ecstatic seers could be interpreted, in Vincent's terms, as a harmful, fantasy-laden alienation of the mind. Similarly, Bartholomew the Englishman describes melancholics (again, read "women") as prone to devastating fantasies and illusions, and gives examples ranging from irrational fears and suicidal thoughts, to the delusion that they hold the world in their hands and must not drop it, to paranoid beliefs that their friends are really persecutors.[41] The focus here is upon the melancholics' lack of a firm grasp on reality: they are likely to have an exceedingly active fantasy life in which they perpetually exist at the center of great, unfolding dramas. Antoninus of Florence attributed a melancholic condition to a "commotion" of the humors, and he went on to explain that severe cases of melancholy can cause a permanent alteration of the senses leading to mania and insanity. In particularly severe cases, some melancholics "lament, others jump, others believe that the stupidest things are absolutely true . . . [such as] that they bear frogs in their womb, or that they see or are possessed by demons." For Antoninus, significantly, extreme melancholy of this kind may be caused "by inordinate vigils, fasts, zeal, scrupulosity, or deep thinking."[42] Presumably women, already predisposed to a melancholic temperament, also should avoid excessive asceticism and intellectual challenges, lest they suffer from mania or the perception of demonic possession.

An anonymous commentator on the late-thirteenth-century treatise *On the Secrets of Women* (a text attributed to Albertus Magnus in the Middle Ages and thus granted an added luster) added a new detail to the understanding of female physiology by asserting that women can sometimes fall into a fictive ecstasy or trance. This was the result of noxious vapors ascending to the head

[40] *Spec. Doc.* 13.121, 1248.
[41] *RP* 4.11, 113.
[42] Antoninus of Florence, *Summa theologica* 1.2.6 (Verona, 1740), 92. I am much indebted to the anonymous reader for Cornell University Press who directed me to this text.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

from the mixture of menstrual blood and putrefying humors that gathered in women's wombs. The disease was related to the disorder known as "suffocation of the womb," but was formally distinguished from it and known as "vertigo." The coolness of the female body was unable to process or utilize foods and fluids as fully as the warm male. As a result, humoral wastes gathered together in the womb until being purged on a monthly basis. Although men could suffer a similar infirmity from digestive vapors, females were thought to be more susceptible to this affliction, which sent them into a deathlike trance state. The commentator continues,

> Old women who have recovered from it say that it was caused by an ecstasy during which they were snatched from their bodies and borne to heaven or to hell, but this is ridiculous. The illness happens from natural causes; however, they think that they have been snatched from their bodies because vapors rise to the brain. If these vapors are very thick and cloudy, it appears to them that they are in hell and that they see black demons; if the vapors are light, it seems to them that they are in heaven and that they see God and his angels shining brightly.[43]

Thus the otherworldly visions of women were inherently subject to debate and criticism. Female visionaries relaying information about the regions of the afterlife may well be suffering simply from an excess of rotten humors. Vincent of Beauvais referred to the same illness in his *Mirror of Doctrine*, noting that menstrual retention generates morbid vapors which, if they ascend to the head, can cause headaches and migraines, darkened vision, vertigo, and trance states.[44] Bartholomew the Englishman added frenzy to the maleficent symptoms of the syndrome.[45]

The distinction between the vertigo syndrome and divine or demonic spirit possession was entirely eroded by William of Auvergne. William explicitly described how demons may mimic the symptoms and etiology of vertigo through a manipulation of their victim's internal physiology. He first explains the natural illness, which occurs, "through a corruption of the humors or of the limbs, either from exterior things or from vapors released interiorly from the body and ascending to the brain, which then fix certain passions and impressions onto the perceptive organs in the brain. However,

[43] Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, ed. Lemay, 134. Unfortunately, this particular commentary is not reproduced in any of the printed copies of *De secretis mulierum* available to me. I have therefore quoted Lemay's translation.

[44] *Spec. Doc.* 13.96, 1232.

[45] *RP* 4.8, 105.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

these kinds of impressions are produced in a such way that it is easy for evil spirits to approach these organs and to imprint similar passions upon them through their own effort."[46] These demonically induced, vaporous impressions can become so persuasive and overwhelming that one victim known to William believed himself to be, by turns, the son of God, the Holy Spirit, the son of the devil, and the Antichrist. A woman victim believed herself to be possessed by the devil and made many other tiresome claims that William declined to elaborate. William ascribed this condition to an unusual degree of impressionability, which he describes as having a "porous spirit, which received imaginary appearances and forms of this kind easily, and conducted them intimately inward."[47] Thus vertigo and an inherent susceptibility to invasions of demonic influence were linked in William's mind.

This complex of ideas about female physiology constructed female trance states as manifold in origin. Though there was some acknowledgment that women could truly be divinely inspired, there also was an increasing tendency to multiply alternative explanations for female reports of trances and visions. And of course, the more explanations that were advanced for specifically female trance states, the more difficult it became for observers to interpret altered states of consciousness in women as indicators of divine inspiration. The coexistence of several heuristic frameworks for women's possessed behaviors rendered the percentage of "authentic" cases of women's divine inspiration correspondingly smaller, as this was only one of several possible explanations.

Thus natural—and highly gender-specific—explanations were advanced for an understanding of trance as pathology. Yet even if natural causes were ruled out, the presumption of moral frailty in women made it seem likely to many medieval intellectuals that they would be more readily influenced by evil spirits than by good. Nor were these ideas simply isolated in medical texts. If we look forward for a moment to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, when the earliest discernment of spirits treatises were composed, we see the direct effects of these ideas in the evaluation of female spirit possession. Writers like Jean Gerson listed women's essential inconstancy, desire for novelty, mendaciousness, and melancholy temperament as reasons why female claims to divine inspiration should be regarded with skepticism: "How, then, could it be suitable for [the female] sex to walk in greatness, surrounded with miracles? To receive visions added to more visions daily? To

[46] William of Auvergne, *De universo*, 1041.
[47] Ibid.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

consider injuries to the brain, like epilepsy or catatonia (*congelatio*), or else the appearance of melancholy, to be a miracle?"[48]

In pathologizing women's trances and visions, and attributing them to female complexional qualities, these thinkers implicitly were naturalizing possessed behaviors. While the issue of testing spirits had long been associated with the careers of laywomen, this set of medical ideas provided the imprimatur of a scientific and rationalistic explanation for why women were more vulnerable to demons and delusions alike. The significations of these behaviors thus were extended into new realms: trances were not only possible indicators of divine or demonic possession but also highly charged signifiers of a primal feminine weakness and instability. In sum, this recursive movement back to the body simultaneously engendered and legitimated the predominance of women among the possessed.

OPEN/SEALED — POROUS/DENSE

Women were the weaker sex, the softer sex, the less rational sex. Women's bodies were the glory of man, not the image of God. Women were moist; they were cool; they received impressions readily. The female temperament was sluggish, but paradoxically women also were hysterical, prone to fantasies and frenzies. Women's wombs filled up with corrupting humors that clouded their minds and their vision.

Women's bodies also were *open.* This is not my adjective, but a medieval word choice: the descriptive pairings open/sealed and porous/dense frequently were applied to female and male physiology. In a sense, these words are simply a recoding of the idea that women are more prone to receive spiritual impressions: the porous, open body is an impressionable body. However, these pairs of words also were overlaid with other dichotomies, such as sin and righteousness, body and soul, and divine and demonic possession. The richness of this particular semantic field thus presents a choice opportunity to explore how gender notions overlapped with other categories of analysis.

The conception of the female body as singularly porous and open may be viewed as a pneumatic version of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body, which is open in terms of the physical ways it interacts with—even in-

[48] *ED*, 456.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

terpenetrates—its environment.[49] Forever oozing, excreting, and devouring, the grotesque body is, for Bakhtin, bound to its surroundings in a relationship of continual exchange. By perpetually taking in and expelling pieces of its environment, the grotesque body continually processes, contains, and encapsulates that environment. There is an interpenetration of the interior and exterior conditions of the body, an intermingling of self and context. The grotesque body is elementally unbounded, ever-changing, and fluid. Bakhtin's description echoes medieval constructions of the female body, though he refocuses the body's openness from a highly refined spiritual plane to a grossly physical one.

The opinion that female bodies were more porous or open than male bodies may be found in a number of different medieval discursive traditions, including medical works (where it was adopted from Aristotle),[50] hagiographies, and exempla compilations. For example, these associations are laid forth in fascinating detail by Vincent of Beauvais in book 13 of the *Mirror of Doctrine*, which is devoted to theoretical medicine. After discussing the various humors and complexion types, Vincent inserts a short chapter on sex differences, in which he links women's cooler complexions directly to a physiological characteristic best translated as "porosity":

> Women have colder complexions than men, and therefore among creatures they are smaller than the males, and moister. Also, because of the coldness of their complexions, and lack of exercise, they have many superfluities. And so, the substance of their flesh is more porous (*rarior*). However, a man's flesh may become more porous as concerns the local complexion that mingles with her, for when he is in a dense state he is unable to penetrate her.[51]

Vincent is referring, in the euphemisms of his last sentence, to the need for an erection of the penis before intercourse can take place. His understanding of this process is that penile erection involves a process of inflation, an idea that relates to the medieval commonplace of the testicles as a pair of bellows. The latter would inflate the penis with air, rendering it more expansive and porous, and thus more compatible for mixing with the female body that it is about to penetrate. The man's genitals in their more usual "dense" state are incompatible with female porosity. An intriguing modern reiteration of

[49] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 1984).

[50] Cited in Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons," in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Images of Women in Antiquity* (Detroit, 1983), 3–19.

[51] *Spec. Doc.* 13.16, 1178.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

this idea has been recorded by the anthropologist Giovanni Pizza in oral interviews in twentieth-century Campania. An informant named Amelia explains: "A woman has all her pores open, all of them, her entire person, not like a man, a man is closed, he *sbuccia* (opens) only when he's making love and that's the end of it . . . she's open, while a man, no, he doesn't get stung and serious things don't enter."[52]

Vincent of Beauvais later returned to the relative merits of porous versus dense bodies. According to the hierarchy he proposed, the best type of body is midway between porous and dense. At either extreme, porous and dense bodies each have their drawbacks. The denser kind of body Vincent describes as fat, easily tired, and prone to frequent urination and evacuation. In sum, the dense body is physically similar to Bakhtin's grotesque body, in constant physical exchange with its environment. The highly porous body, on the other hand, is a pneumatic counterpart, open to winds and more subtle environmental exchanges. This build therefore is more prone to various indispositions that arise from subtle environmental penetration. Vincent draws the contrast vividly:

> [Dense-bodied people] are not easily made ill by exterior things, like cold air, the sun, et cetera. The stings (*ictus*) of these things cannot pierce through to their interiors, on account of the density of their bodies. However, porous-bodied people are long-limbed and lean due to the excessive looseness [of their flesh]. External forces can quickly pierce into them because they are porous. . . . They suffer many infirmities from external forces.[53]

The conception Vincent seems to be advancing here is that porous-bodied and dense-bodied people both have roughly the same amount of matter or substance, but this matter may be either densely or loosely packed. The example of the penis, employed earlier, may have provided a comparison point for Vincent's thinking in this regard: the same amount of matter may be densely or loosely arranged, shorter or longer, compact or dilated. The effect of loose, expansive flesh is a greater amount of air incorporated into the body and, correspondingly, a more penetrable, larger-pored skin surface that readily admits exterior forces or influences. Indeed, female flesh often was described as "loose" in medieval medical texts, a quality that was linked to fe-

[52] Giovanni Pizza, "The Virgin and the Spider: Revisiting Spirit Possession in Southern Europe," in Cristina Papa et al., eds., *Incontri di etnologia europea. European ethnology meeting* (Naples, 1998): 66.

[53] *Spec. Doc.* 13.52, 1204.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

male softness. And as we shall see, the subtle "stings" that pierce porous bodies from outside include aggressive spirits seeking to possess a human—or again, more likely a female—body.[54]

The association of males with densely packed, and women with open or expansive arrangements of material substance, is one that recurs in other descriptions of sex differences as well. Albertus Magnus stated it as a given principle that "the body of a woman is more porous and the body of a man is more dense."[55] He argued that the greater porosity of the female body was due to the greater need of the female body type for exchange with her outside environment. "The porosity (*raritas*) of a woman's body is . . . from the abundance of undigested humors. By contrast, the density (*compactio*) of a man's body derives from . . . the strength of his heat."[56] The special purgative requirements of the female body were seen as a by-product of her diminished heat. Her cool body lacks sufficient warmth to digest and process all the humors it produces; thus, cool bodies have an excess of unprocessed humoral material requiring purgation in some way. This occurs most notably in women's menstrual flow. However, extra humors also were thought to dissipate or otherwise be cleansed from the system through more refined openings in the body, porous gaps between material substance, which were especially abundant in women's cooler physiologies and uncompacted flesh. Conversely, however, male bodies possessed clearer internal passageways. Albertus elsewhere notes that the coolness of the female body often led to a blockage or narrowing of these internal channels, which resulted in their inability to emit seed during intercourse.[57]

Ideas regarding female porosity already were current in the twelfth century, though the earlier thinkers do not elaborate them as fully as the thirteenth-century writers just cited. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, wrote of women's bodies as punctuated by "windows, openings, and wind-passages."[58] Her phrasing, though laconic, would seem to refer to the same conception of porous female bodies shot through with air passages. Similarly Heloise, in a letter to Abelard, quoted Macrobius Theodosius to the effect that women's bodies are pierced with more "holes," "channels," and "outlets" than the

[54] Males, however, were supplied with special, large pores for the ejection of superfluities in the form of body hair and beard growth. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex*, 182–83.

[55] Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus* 15.6, 262. In my edition this segment was omitted from the page, but included in a sheet of errata.

[56] Ibid., 263.

[57] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI* 9.1, ed. H. Stadler, 2 vols (Münster, 1916), 1:676. Here as elsewhere I have rendered *rarus* as "porous" and *porus* as "internal channel" or "internal passageway."

[58] Quoted in Pouchelle, *Body and Surgery*, 148.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

male. She ascribes this—as would Albertus—to women's need for more frequent purgation of humors. Heloise goes on to argue that women can tolerate the effects of wine better than men because alcoholic vapors can more easily be dispersed through the pores in a woman's skin.[59]

The notion that women's bodies were more open to exchanges with their environments provides a fascinating counterpoint to the conception of spirit possession as involving a literal entrance into the body. For porous bodies were especially open to spiritual penetration and exchanges. The openings inherent in the porous body type provided spiritual pathways that spirits could exploit. Thus Albertus argued that spirits exist as very fine bodies and that they therefore require physical passages to move through when entering or existing inside a human body. Speaking of the human spirit, he writes, "A spirit is a subtle body that is very penetrative. . . . Parts of the animal body are porous and have passageways . . . thus when the spirit moves around inside a body, it goes through the channels of the body."[60] There must be open, unoccupied space for the spirits to move through, special interior channels. Yet the corollary to Albertus's statement is that a porous bodily surface may more easily permit the entrance into the body of a "penetrative" foreign spirit. As Vincent of Beauvais phrased it, the subtle "stings" of external forces can get inside a porous body more readily than a dense one. William of Auvergne, as we have seen, linked the false ecstasy of the vertigo syndrome (whether natural or created through demonic manipulation of humors and internal vapors) to a special porosity of spirit, by which he meant the apprehensive facilities of the mind. This displacement is much in accord with William's approach to spiritual interference, for he consistently tends to regard the impressions of spirits as attacks on the perceptual and cognitive facilities, rather than as attacks on the flesh and limbs of the body.

The linguistic trope of porosity may be read against the perception that women were more vulnerable to spiritual invasion than men—though my intention is to probe the strains and linkages among different realms of discourse, rather than to establish a causal priority. This interrogative procedure necessarily involves a careful layering, as in a series of transparencies, of evidence about the understanding of spirit possession as a literal entrance in to the body; with evidence about the marked gendering of states of possession and ecstasy; with evidence about women's greater impressionability; with evidence about the greater porosity or penetrability of the female body, and so on. Through this process of layering and juxtaposition, we can arrive at a

[59] Betty Radice, trans., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (London, 1974), 166.
[60] Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus* 16.8, 279.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

more textured understanding of spirit possession as a phenomenon that derives complex meanings from broader cultural assumptions and mentalities.

From this perspective, the assumption of an elemental porosity or openness to the female body may be seen as a translation, into medical terms, of an inchoate idea that propels the logic of women's relationships with the spiritual realm in medieval texts. The dichotomy between inner and outer, and questions of controlling the body's surface vulnerability to spirits, typically frame discussions of both divine and demonic possession in many sources. The twin emphases of transgressive ecstasy and internal union found in women's vitae, for example, center precisely on the issue of the spirit's access to and egress from the body. Descriptions of ecstacy and inspiration, of spiritual dislocation and penetration, portray the surface of the visionary's body as frangible, breachable, open. Nor were hagiographic exemplars and their imitators the only medieval women to lay claim to the experience of spiritual transgressions of physical boundaries. Indeed, the medieval popular folklore of the good things, good ladies, nighttime ladies, or followers of Lady Abundance provides an intriguing comparison to the careers of inspired women as described in hagiographies.[61] Like the predominantly female ranks of divinely possessed seers, the predominantly female good things claimed to leave their bodies in spirit in order to follow a divine figure. In both cases, the female is associated with the ability to engage in shamanistic spirit flights, leaving the body behind in an immobilized trance state. Upon returning to the body, the spirit reanimates it; sometimes the visionary is then able to make pronouncements about the fate of the dead she has seen, or dispense occult information about secret events that she has witnessed in her invisible spiritual wanderings. Indeed, the trances of the good things and of divinely inspired laywomen seem to draw upon a common set of cultural presuppositions about the ease with which spirits may go into and out from the female body.

The construction of male bodies as dense, compact, and *sealed* rendered males more impervious to spirit possession, for their surfaces could not so

[61] I discuss these ideas briefly in Nancy Caciola, "Breath, Heart, Guts: The Body and Spirits in the Middle Ages," in É. Pócs and G. Klaniczay, eds., *Demons, Spirits, Witches: Christian Demonology and Popular Mythology* (Budapest, forthcoming). On the fairy cult, see Gustav Henningsen, "'The Ladies from Outside': An Archaic Pattern of the Witches' Sabbath," in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1990), 191–215; Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest, 1999); and idem, *Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe*, Folklore Fellows Communications 243 (Helsinki, 1989). Also see the works cited in note 36.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

easily be breached. This is clear in a particularly provocative exemplum reprinted in more than one compilation. According to this tale, the Pagan emperor Diocletian had a daughter, Arthemia, who was violently possessed by a demon. The unclean spirit revealed that only the saintly deacon Cyriacus could cast him out of the girl. Yet when the demon was conjured by Cyriacus, it complained that it would not leave without another "vessel" to enter into. Cyriacus obligingly responded, "'Here is my body: come in if you can.' The demon answered in turn, 'I cannot enter into your vessel, for it is sealed and closed off on all sides.'"[62] The body of the girl apparently was not so inviolate. Yet even as the exemplum reinforces gender distinctions in regard to the openness or sealed quality of Cyriacus's body, it also unveils another set of associations underlying this physiological opposition. The open/sealed duality is inscribed upon the body not only as a matter of gender but as a result of the individual's moral status. It is significant that the deacon Cyriacus is male and Christian, whereas the demoniac is female and Pagan. Thus the conception of bodies as either porous and open or dense and sealed also alludes to notions of sin and righteousness. Here again, the normatively male body type is aligned with inviolacy and virtue; the normatively female, with transgression and sin. These conceptions mutually sustain one another. The discursive construction of the female as open is yet another variant on the female as easily impressionable, as unstable and frivolous, and as morally inconstant.

Reinforcing this point is the fact that many exemplary tales of demonic possession present the entrance of unclean spirits as the baleful result of sinful behavior, as we have seen in chapter 1. Sin alters the composition of the body, opening up the flesh so as to allow the demon to enter in. This linkage between vulnerability to possession, openness, and sin and is vividly expressed by John of Salisbury, who defined the senses as "seven windows into the soul [that are] in the head. . . . Through them . . . the intelligence (*mens*) goes out from and returns to the mind (*animus*). . . . Therefore if these windows are closed to the devil, and open to God, the soul will go out wisely following the prescribed ways. . . . Confession, and a healthy remorse, are a perfect fortification for the windows against all the treacheries of the Enemy."[63] Similarly, William of Auvergne wrote that possessing demons can interfere with the flow of sensory information to the soul, for "the senses are like gates into the body through which ingressions and egressions of this kind

[62] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. T. Graesse (1890; reprint, Osnabrück, 1965), 487. The exemplum is also incorporated into Jean de Mailly, *Abrégé des gestes et miracles des saints*, ed. A. Dondaine (Paris, 1947), 316.

[63] John of Salisbury, *De septem septennis*, in *PL*, 199:950–51.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

are made."[64] And Vincent of Beauvais warned against demons who subtly joined themselves to sensory stimuli and thereby entered into the body by hitching a ride, so to speak, on an odor or color.[65] Though both men and women were made vulnerable by the seven sensory openings of the body, however, the additional association between women and a more general porosity rendered her especially defenseless.

SAINTLY SEALING TECHNIQUES

Historians have long noted that medieval writers and theologians spoke about the body as a material aggregate of the individual's moral status.[66] Indeed, the idea that one's degree of bodily openness could be a labile element of one's moral status irresistibly raises the question of whether some individuals might manipulate the porosity of the body through either devotional practices or spiritual sloth. There are clear indications in some medieval texts that this was indeed believed to be the case, sometimes mechanically so. Thus, Gerald of Wales tells of a Jew who crossed himself while spending the night in a Pagan temple, even though he had no faith in the gesture. As darkness fell, a terrible horde of wicked spirits filled the room, but they were unable to possess him. "Alas! Alas!" they cried, "An empty vessel, indeed, but a sealed one."[67] The Jew is empty because of his lack of faith, but even so he is physically sealed by virtue of the cross.

Even more striking is an exemplum recounted by the thirteenth-century Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach. The tale is similar to the one about Arthemia and Cyriacus, but with one significant difference: the body of the exorcist is sealed through contact with the divine. Thus, the demon possessing a woman, when conjured by an abbot to depart, responds,

> "Where will I go?" The abbot said, "Look, I am opening my mouth, enter if you can." It said, "I cannot enter, because today the Most High entered." To which the abbot responded, "Climb up on to these two

[64] William of Auvergne, *De universo*, 1042.

[65] *Spec. Hist.* 2.115, 151.

[66] Saul Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974).

[67] Giraldus Cambrensis, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, ed. J. S. Brewer, in *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi scriptores*, vol. 21: *Giraldi Cambrensis opera* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1964) 2, 101–2. There is a pun in the Latin. The demons lament that the Jew's body is *signatum*, meaning both sealed up and "signed" or crossed.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

fingers," offering his thumb and index finger. "I cannot," it said, "for today you held the Most High." Indeed, the abbot had said mass that morning.[68]

Thus the Eucharist provides a temporary seal for the body, in this case reinforcing the saintly male qualities of the abbot protagonist. His mouth is open, but his body is sealed by the holy presence of the Eucharist; his fingers are offered as a perch, but they are sealed against demonic touch. As in the previous case, however, the woman victim is markedly vulnerable and open to demonic incursion, a gender distinction rendered all the more visible by the centrality of the performance of the mass to the story.

There are additional valences to this cluster of linkages that are worth exploring, briefly. If, for example, the Eucharist was believed to "seal" the body against demonic influence, then the predilection of lay religious women for frequent communion may have had additional overtones beyond the obvious, and well-documented, aspects of divine union implied in the practice.[69] In addition, one could interpret the incorporation of the Body of Christ as a temporary means of enfolding within oneself the *imago Dei*—Christ himself. Since all that was in God's image was thereby rendered more invulnerable to demonic possession, frequent reception of the Host would indeed have been a sealing technique. Many of the spiritual exercises most intimately associated with inspired women in the later Middle Ages may be read as attempts to "seal" the elementally open and porous body. Caroline Bynum has pointed out the degree to which extended fasting acts to seal the body from interchange with its environment. Not only does fasting involve refusal to bring food or drink from outside the body in, but there is a corresponding cessation of normal purgative activities, such as menstruation, sweating, urination, and evacuation.[70] Frequent purgation, as we have seen, was held to be a prime characteristic of the porous female body type: indeed, the female body was porous precisely because it required outlets for frequent purgation. Thus by putting a stop to all such purgative processes and exchanges, the ascetic woman may be understood as having de-feminized—that is, sealed—her body. The body that did not need to purge was less female and less open, therefore more masculine and closer to God. Similarly, emphasis on main-

[68] *DM*, 1:314.

[69] Caroline Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), 119–50; André Vauchez, *Les laics au Moyen Age: Pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris, 1987), 259–64.

[70] Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast.*

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

taining the intact physical "seal" of virginity may have had the additional symbolic appeal of thereby closing off a potential openness to the surrounding environment. A few medieval tales of possession and exorcism involve demons entering or exiting through the "shameful parts,"[71] and it may well be the case that intact virginity was thought to provide a blockage against this particular kind of demonic access. To say this is not to detract from the complex history and symbolic connotations of these practices as ascetic forms of *imitatio Christi*, it is merely to note that the duality of sealed and open was played out in these behaviors even as they also fulfilled other priorities.

Some hagiographies quite self-consciously deploy the trope of sealing off the female body. Humiltà of Florence, for example, was said to worry about the openness of her senses to sin and demonic temptation, and to have prayed for their sealing:

> You, my strong angels . . . bind up my mouth so well, that it may remain closed off from every vain or careless word. . . . Place two seals of love upon my eyes, so that they may not contemplate anything of this world at the same time as the Beloved; but nevertheless keep them open and alert, so that they will not impede the recitation of the Divine Office through sleepiness. . . . Keep my ears open to the name "Jesus," but let no other word, which could be a mortal poison to the soul, penetrate into them. . . . Guard all my bodily senses, so that my spiritual senses may take delight, and my soul may calmly spend a moment with its Beloved.[72]

Humiltà's prayer vividly exploits the tension between sealed and open physiologies and combines it with a vigilant border control that rejects all that is unclean while admitting divine influences. She prays that evil forces might not be allowed to penetrate inside her body through the gateways of her senses, while simultaneously begging for them to remain open to divine infusions.

The ideas being advanced here restate in different terms the associations we already have seen in etymologies, medical texts, and theological treatises.

[71] The phrase is from a tale recounted in the vita of Hildegard of Bingen. See chapter 1 for this and other examples. For an interpretation of the sexual dynamics underlying possession, see Moshe Sluhovsky, "A Divine Apparition or Demonic Possession? Female Agency and Church Authority in Sixteenth-Century France," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, 4 (1995): 1036–52; Lyndal Roper, "Exorcism and the Theology of the Body," in *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1994), 171–98.

[72] *Vita S. Humiltatis Abbatissae*, *AASS*, May 5:215.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Women are "malleable" for Isidore of Seville and his followers; "impressionable" for Albertus Magnus and William of Auvergne; "mobile" for Henry Kramer, author of the *Malleus maleficarum;* "porous" for Vincent of Beauvais; "open" for hagiographers and exempla writers. All these words recursively turn upon one another, configuring the feminine as both pliable and decentered, always in flux and never stable, her boundaries permeable and her identity labile.

Ultimately, however, the requirement for such extreme vigilance over the female body's borders and entryways recognizes that body as a site both dangerous and debased. The weaker sex was fragile because of its porosity, its humoral coolness, and its lack of intellect. These deficiencies dramatized the female body as a conduit for malign forces into the world. As Albertus Magnus summed up, "It is commonly and proverbially and popularly said that women are more deceitful and weak, irresolute, immodest, eloquent in lies: in brief, a woman is nothing other than a devil in the likeness of a human form."[73]

FALLEN ANGELS AND FALLEN WOMEN

Albertus's statement may be inverted. If women really were devils, then devils really were women, at least for some commentators. The final tile in the mosaic I have been piecing together is a mirror, a fragment that reverses the terms of inquiry. Rather than exploring the demonization of the female, this final section is devoted to the feminization of devils. For the bodies of fallen angels had much in common with the bodies of fallen women.

In the 1230s William of Auvergne commented upon reports of hordes of spirits in female form seen flying through the nighttime skies, a collective apparition known to him the "nighttime ladies." William knew that the nighttime ladies were demonic because they presented a female appearance. Their female bodies were, for William, a spontaneous index of their demonic character:

> The female sex was created from man for the sake of reproduction and for children. But reproduction is not possible for an abstract spiritual substance. Spirits cannot have children, and so they cannot have a sex, for sex only exists for the reproduction of sexed beings. Therefore this

[73] Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus* 15.11, 265.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

> difference of sex [among spirits], or the appearance of it, is a clear sign: Good angels only appear in the form of men, and never in female form, as do evil spirits.[74]

Among spirits, a female appearance is an exclusive signifier of demonic status. Male appearance, conversely, is angelic, as William makes clear in the continuation of the passage:

> What if someone should say that the virile sex also has no place among exalted and blessed spirits? I answer that though this is true, nevertheless virtue, and strength, and active ability has a place in men, and those things are quite appropriate to spiritual substances. However, the passive ability and infirmity and weakness that are the womanly characteristics are entirely inappropriate for this kind of spirit.[75]

The *virtus* of men—virtue, strength, active ability—enables a discernment of spiritual character via physiological appearance. In point of fact, angels were depicted exclusively in male terms, in medieval theology as in medieval images.[76] This angelic virility echoes the masculinity of Christ, which was receiving increasing artistic focus in the later Middle Ages: the "good" pole of the supernatural is exclusively, insistently male.[77] By contrast, the feminine is associated, again, exclusively with weakness, sexuality, and evil nature.

Investigating the sexes of spirits provides the historian with a peerless opportunity to map out the broader semantic terrain of terms such as masculine and feminine. Medieval demonologists like William insisted that spiritual beings are neither male nor female in their essence: the appearance of a sex is a mask, a performative representation. Yet if spirits do not have sexes (a material notion), they *do* have genders (in this context, a moral notion): femininity was the province of the demonic hosts, as masculinity was the property of the angelic choirs. And William's association of unclean spirits with feminine characteristics was not unique; indeed there is a fascinating body of medieval evidence that ascribes female characteristics to demons. This may be done explicitly, by depicting demonic spirits as female; or implicitly, by depicting them as having porous and open body types.

The Latin words *demon* and *diabolus* both are masculine: thus demons normally were designated with the masculine pronoun. The default position

[74] William of Auvergne, *De universo*, 1068.
[75] Ibid.
[76] David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1998).
[77] Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

in medieval texts, then, is that the devil and his legions are symbolically male. Above all, however, demonic bodies were hybrid and unstable: "in Hell there exists no order, only eternal horror."[78] Thus the chaotic character of the unclean spiritual physiology allows a demon to take many forms, including (or, according to William of Auvergne, especially) a female form. We already have seen an instance of this motif in a scene described above, the temptation of Eve. A more disturbing example, painted in the Duomo of San Gimignano by Taddeo de Bartolo sometime in the 1390s, depicts a female demon with large, pendulous breasts punishing a woman fornicator (fig. 8).[79] More common is the theme of the beautiful demon courtesan or temptress with refined clothing and coif, whose demonic nature is revealed by some small detail: delicate horns sprouting from her tresses, claws or hooves glimpsed from beneath the hem of her robe, or perhaps the tip of a tail.

The most feminized fallen angel of all, however, was the morning star himself, Lucifer. A dense set of associations between sin, bodily openness or porosity, and female reproductive anatomy may be seen in certain representations of the devil, images that recapitulate in visual form William of Auvergne's musings on the sexes of spirits. These devils are of an unstable status, nominally sexless yet assuming a female appearance—and the female, in turn, cannot escape from being defined by sexual and gestative functions. The figure of the devil took on increasing importance in art in the thirteenth century, especially on the Italian peninsula, with its precocious development of large-scale public art projects.[80] Despite some earlier examples, the devil

[78] Bull of canonization for Catherine of Siena, CPCS, 516.

[79] One could further note that this is an interesting example of demonic hybridity: though the demon's form is female, the act of sexual punishment it performs places it in a masculine role. This activity—a female penetrating another with an instrument—was considered among the gravest sexual sins in medieval penitentials, precisely because it involved a female arrogation of a male prerogative. For discussion of female homoeroticism, Bernadette Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, 1996); Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts. The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1986). The image also brings to mind the twelfth-century *Vision of Tundale*, with its remarkable description of the punishment of fornicators. Tundale sees fornicating sinners raped and impregnated by a giant beast; they then give birth to vipers and beaked serpents that rend their bodies to pieces. But it is not only female sinners who are represented thus; male sinners, too, conceive, gestate, and give birth. These male mothers conceive offspring within their limbs and chests, where they "gestate" until the time arrives for them to give birth. The sinful body, the open body, is presented as fulfilling a female bodily function—even when its explicit sex is male. Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* (New York, 1989), 149–95; 252–53; Claude Carozzi, "Structure et fonction de la vision de Tnugdal," in A. Vauchez, ed., *Faire croire: Modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XIIe au XVe siècles* (Rome, 1981), 223–34.

[80] Jerôme Baschet discusses the orality of representations of Hell in *Les justices de l'au-*

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 8. An ugly female demon. This detail of a fresco depicting the Inferno occupies a conspicuous location on the lowest reaches of the wall. A female sinner is sexually punished for the sin of fornication by a bestial female demon. Fresco by Taddeo de Bartolo, 1396. San Gimignano: Duomo. Photo by Richard S. Cohen.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

had not been a popular subject in medieval art before this time. Between about 1270 and 1340, however, an extraordinary series of mosaics and frescoes were produced in Italy that nurtured a new style of Satanic representation. This series, as it unfolded, progressively developed and accentuated the open qualities of the devil's and demons' bodies, depicting them as covered with extra orifices that continually incorporate and expel sinners. The culmination of this series of images re-sexes Satan as a female, at least from the waist down, for the figure is in the act of giving birth. Although the analysis that follows in the next few pages centers on a specifically Italian iconography, it has echoes and affinities with the broader mental attitudes adduced in previous pages.

A prelude to the iconography of the birthing Satan is the anonymous, c. 1270 mosaic on the ceiling of the baptistery in Florence. The composition centers on the reptilian figure of Satan enthroned on a pair of dragons, and surrounded by various figures of toads, worms, and serpents. This mosaic was influential in its vivid depictions of the torments of Hell, dominated by ingestion and incorporation into the bodies of demons. The dragons of Satan's throne devour sinners, as does Satan himself and the two snakes that spring forth from his ears. Meanwhile, the surrounding reptilian fauna are all busily engaged in biting, chewing, and vomiting various sinners. The souls of humans vomited up by toads are a fascinating reversal of the typical image of the demoniac vomiting up a spirit. And the openness of these demonic bodies, which constantly are absorbing and expelling human spirits, echoes the openness of female physiology, which is so vulnerable to the absorption and expulsion of demonic spirits. Both kinds of bodies are in constant interchange with their environments.

---

delà: Les représentations de l'enfer en France et en Italie (XIIe–XVe siècle) (Rome, 1993), 219–87. This work is the best and most exhaustive starting-place for a study of Hell motifs. See also Baschet, "L'Enfer et son lieu: Rôle fonctionnel des fresques et dynamisation de l'espace cultuel," in S. Boesch-Gajano and L. Scaraffia, eds., *Luoghi sacri e spazi della santità* (Turin, 1990), 551–64; Yves Christie, *Il Giudizio Universale nell'arte del Medioevo* (Milan, 2000); Gary Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1995); Luther Link, *The Devil: The Archfiend in Art from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1996); Fulvio Ricci, *Chiesa di Santa Maria Maggiore, Tuscania* (Viterbo, 1996); Samuel Edgerton, "The Last Judgement as Pageant Setting for Communal Law and Order in Late Medieval Italy," in R. Trexler, ed., *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Binghamton, 1985), 79–100. On the related theme of apocalyptic representations, see Michael Camille, "Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages," in R. Emmerson and B. McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 276–89; Peter Klein, "Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," in Emmerson and McGinn, *Apocalypse*, 159–99.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 9. Satan enthroned. Giotto seems to have been the first artist to depict Satan in the act of expelling a sinner from the lower part of his body. The scene suggests both giving birth and defecation. Fresco by Giotto, c. 1303–5. Padua: Scrovegni Chapel. Photo courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource.

The form of Satan as depicted on the baptistery ceiling was taken up with slight modifications by Giotto in his 1303–5 fresco of the Last Judgment in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (fig. 9). The pose of the figure is identical, as are the dragon throne and the serpents emerging from the devil's ears. However, Giotto added an intriguing and unusual detail. Whereas the Florentine mosaic modestly veils the groin of Satan with a cloth, Giotto boldly disrobed the devil to expose, not a set of male genitals, but an orifice expelling a small body between Satan's spread thighs.[81] In so doing, Giotto established a parallelism between the ingestion of a soul through Satan's mouth and the subsequent evacuation of the sinner from the lower bodily region. Thus one reading of this detail is as a shitting scene: the sinner is eaten, digested, and

[81] The birthing aspect of Giotto's devil has recently been treated in Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: The Program of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua," *Art Bulletin* 80, 2 (1998): 274–87.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

expelled as excrement. However, the placement of the detail on the front of Satan's body also authorizes a reading of the figure as in the act of giving birth. Indeed, anatomically speaking this is the more viable interpretation. However, the two views surely are meant to complement, rather than to exclude, one another. Together they portray the demonic body as porous, as parturient, and as fundamentally unclean, characteristics that move Satan into a decisively feminine semantic field.

The theme was taken up very dramatically in two subsequent portrayals: the fresco by an unknown artist at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Tuscania, executed between 1315 and 1320; and the Last Judgment lately attributed to Buffalmacco in the Camposanto (cemetery) of Pisa, datable to the late 1330s.[82] Unfortunately, both frescoes have been damaged and extensively reconstructed. Tuscania suffered from an earthquake in 1971, while the Camposanto fresco was restored and possibly altered in 1523 and then was severely compromised by a 1944 bombing raid.[83] Although in each case the frescoes have been restored, the clarity and completeness of both works is degraded. However, they remain provocative depictions of devils with hybrid sexual characteristics.

The Tuscania fresco is notable in part for its location on the main apsidal wall of the church, an alteration from the more traditional location over the exit door (fig. 10).[84] Thus rather than being a final reminder of hellfire as congregants left the church, it functioned as a constant presence before the eyes of worshipers throughout the service. The artist was clearly influenced by Giotto's work, for the overall composition is identical. The figure of Satan, however, has been significantly increased in size at Tuscania: it is the largest figure in the fresco, dwarfing even Christ. This devil occupies nearly all the wall space to the right of the apsidal arch, which cuts through the composition.[85] Its body is a male-female hybrid, though with stronger emphasis placed upon the female elements. The head and facial features are those of a bearded, horned man with an elaborate helmet and bestial characteristics. These male elements are in sharp contrast, however, with the lower portion

[82] Ricci, *Santa Maria Maggiore*, 36; Baschet, *Les justices*, 625.

[83] Ricci, *Santa Maria Maggiore*, 6; Baschet, *Les justices*, 625–27.

[84] Christie, *Giudizio Universale*, 317, 350.

[85] Interestingly, the positioning of this element of the fresco would place it before the male congregants during services, for men normally would be seated on the southern side of the aisle, women on the northern. One cannot read a specifically didactic intention behind this circumstance, however, for it is dictated by the combined demands of the iconography (blessed on the right hand of God, damned on His left) and of segregated-seating traditions of long standing. Margaret Aston, "Segregation in Church," in W. Sheils and D. Wood, eds., *Women in the Church* (Oxford, 1990), 237–94.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 10. Final Judgment of the righteous and the damned. This fresco, in which Christ is dwarfed by the figure of Satan, is located just behind the altar and would have been a focus of attention for the congregation throughout the service. Fresco by an unknown artist, 1315–20. Tuscania: Church of Santa Maria Maggiore. Photo courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

of the figure, which has been reconfigured from Giotto's version so as to accentuate the birthing motif more strongly. As before, Satan eats a sinner through a deeply fanged mouth, but the expulsion of sinners below has become a far more visceral and graphic depiction, with stronger sexual overtones (fig. 11). Now bereft of his throne, the devil squats, with knees turned outward and bent, in the standard birthing position of the premodern world. The figure's swollen abdomen, which bulges to both sides and over his upper thighs, suggests a pregnant belly. Even more strikingly, the devil's groin now appears as a broad lateral gash rimmed with blood-red flames. Two heads emerge from this large opening, along with a pair of legs. These emerging souls are about to be engulfed by yet another fanged orifice: a Hell-mouth located at the very bottom of the fresco. This mouth receives into its jaws the sinners just expelled from Satan's body, and re-ingests them. Two blue-gray demons with pitchforks push the sinners down into the Hell-mouth's gullet. Interestingly, all the sinners shown entering the Hell-mouth are female.[86] This redoubling of the feminine in the lowest section of the fresco—the area closest to the observer—presents a strongly gendered monitory message. In any event, the scale and viewing accessibility of this segment strongly stresses the feminized lower portion of the devil's body, while the cycle of devoration/expulsion/re-devoration by the Hell-mouth plays upon the theme of bodily openness as a relentless cycle of exchange.

The most terrifying Satan in medieval art may well be the figure shown in the Camposanto in Pisa (fig. 12). Completely destroyed in World War II, the fresco was painstakingly restored and may now be seen again in something resembling its original state. However, a prewar photograph supplies better clarity than contemporary reproductions.[87] As at Tuscania, this devil is significantly larger than the figures of Christ and Mary in the adjacent Judgment scene. This devil also is more bestial and monstrous than earlier forebears: it has a green-and-yellow, segmented reptilian hide covered with what appear to be round suckers of the kind found on octopi.[88] The head is characterized by a large pair of horns, a snout with flared nostrils, and red-

[86] All are beardless and wimpled. The exclusively female sex of this group was also noticed by Baschet (*Les justices*, 228).

[87] The website for Pisa's Camposanto, http://www.compart-multimedia.com/virtuale/us/pisa/affreschi.htm, makes available a virtual tour of the room containing the fresco, though the camera is situated so as to render viewing of the Hell scene nearly impossible. The contiguous Judgment scene is clear; Hell is to the viewer's right, around a corner.

[88] Baschet sees this segmentation as a form of armor, and the suckers as rivets, but the reptilian coloration suggests suckers to me. See Baschet, *Les justices*, 293–350, for a detailed treatment.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 11. Satan giving birth to women sinners, a detail of figure 10. This Satan has a masculine head but appears to be giving birth to three sinners between his spread thighs. The devil's distended belly, squatting posture, and red-rimmed groin reinforce the impression of a birth scene. The exclusively female sinners who are expelled are immediately devoured by a fanged Hell-mouth at the lowest reaches of the fresco. Photo by Richard S. Cohen.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 12. Hell with a gestating/digesting Satan. Aptly located in the cemetery of Pisa, this fresco is wholly dominated by the tricephalous figure of Satan. This devil ingests sinners through all of his mouths, then gives birth to or defecates them below. Two sinners are shown twisting in torment in the devil's womb or belly. Fresco attributed to Buffalmacco, c. 1332–42. Pisa: Camposanto. Photo courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource.

rimmed, staring eyes. The Camposanto Satan also is the first to be portrayed as tricephalous, a detail derived from Dante's description of Satan in the final cantos of the *Inferno*. Each of the figure's three mouths ingests a sinner, and each clawed hand holds a soul ready for eating. The ejection of sinners in the lower portion of the devil's body is evoked, again, as a birth scene with anatomical precision. Satan squats as a demon-midwife eases out a sinner emerging head-first from an opening between his splayed legs. The reddish coloration and raw, swollen appearance of this orifice rather graphically evoke the labors of birth. Meanwhile, the center of Satan's torso is burst open to reveal a sinner twisting inside his guts. This unveiling of the interior digestion/gestation of sinners in the stomach/womb (the Latin word *venter* could mean either, testifying to a preexisting cultural assimilation between these organs and their processes) completes the incorporative portrayal of the devil's body.[89] Throughout, the fresco teems with vignettes that show

[89] Baschet attributes this detail to a 1523 restoration (*Les justices*, 62–67). Even so, the

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

demons devouring, dismembering, and otherwise transgressing the bodily boundaries of various sinful souls, including a Hell-mouth located at the upper right. All distinction between interior and exterior is collapsed as these open bodies continually fragment, engulf, and expel one another in turn. Again, whether through actual anatomical means or through the more allusive strategy of representing bodily openness, the Hell realms of these frescoes are dominated by bodies with feminine characteristics. The open body and the female body are symbolically elided with the demonic body.

Later artists extended the motif by multiplying the number of orifices ingesting and expelling souls. Satan is shown continually devouring and shitting, bearing and birthing, the souls of the damned (figs. 13 and 14). Ancillary mouths and orifices—in one case, beaks—appear in the figure's ears, at the elbows and knees, stomach, even on the devil's breast in place of nipples.[90] These elaborations raise the motif of the open-bodied Satan to a frenetic level of incorporative and expulsive activity. If demonic possession is characterized by the incorporation of a foreign spirit into the body, then we may say that Satan is "possessed" by the spirits of the sinners inside her body. Satan, like a possession-prone woman, is characterized by a weak and fluid bodily identity: a changeable, hybrid body that receives impressions easily; a porous body that interpenetrates its environment, absorbing and expelling elements of its surroundings.

As William of Auvergne noted, spirits do not really have a sex, they only assume the appearance of one. Angelic and demonic spirits thus function as a control group in this discussion: lacking an actual sex, they merely masquerade in human form. In brief, exploring the parodic sexes of these spirits allows us to interrogate the deeper associations of masculine and feminine within a context that is divorced from biology, and to discuss gender constructions apart from actual biological sex. From this perspective, the feminine becomes a marker not of sex but of demonic uncleanness and sin. The masculine, by contrast, is a marker for the angels, for human fortitude and virtue, and for Christ himself.

---

dating does not seem too late to be of use in exploring long-standing cultural mentalities of the kind I am treating. I am interested less in the intentions of the original artist than in the fresco as a materialization of broader cultural ideas.

[90] Aside from the locales illustrated in this book, this motif also appears in the Church of the Abbey of Viboldone, outside Milan (fourteenth-century, Giusto da Menabuoi); in the Duomo of San Gimignano (1396, Taddeo de Bartolo); in the Church of San Francesco, Paradise Chapel, Terni (1445–51, Bartolomeo di Tommaso da Foligno), and in the Church of San Fermo Maggiore, Verona (1410–11, by Martin of Vernoa).

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

Figure 13. Satan giving birth to Pride. In this well-preserved work, a face has been added to the devil's belly, and the sinner to whom the devil gives birth has been labeled "Superbia"—Pride. Fresco by Giovanni da Modena, c. 1410–12. Bologna: Church of San Petronius. Photo by Richard S. Cohen.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

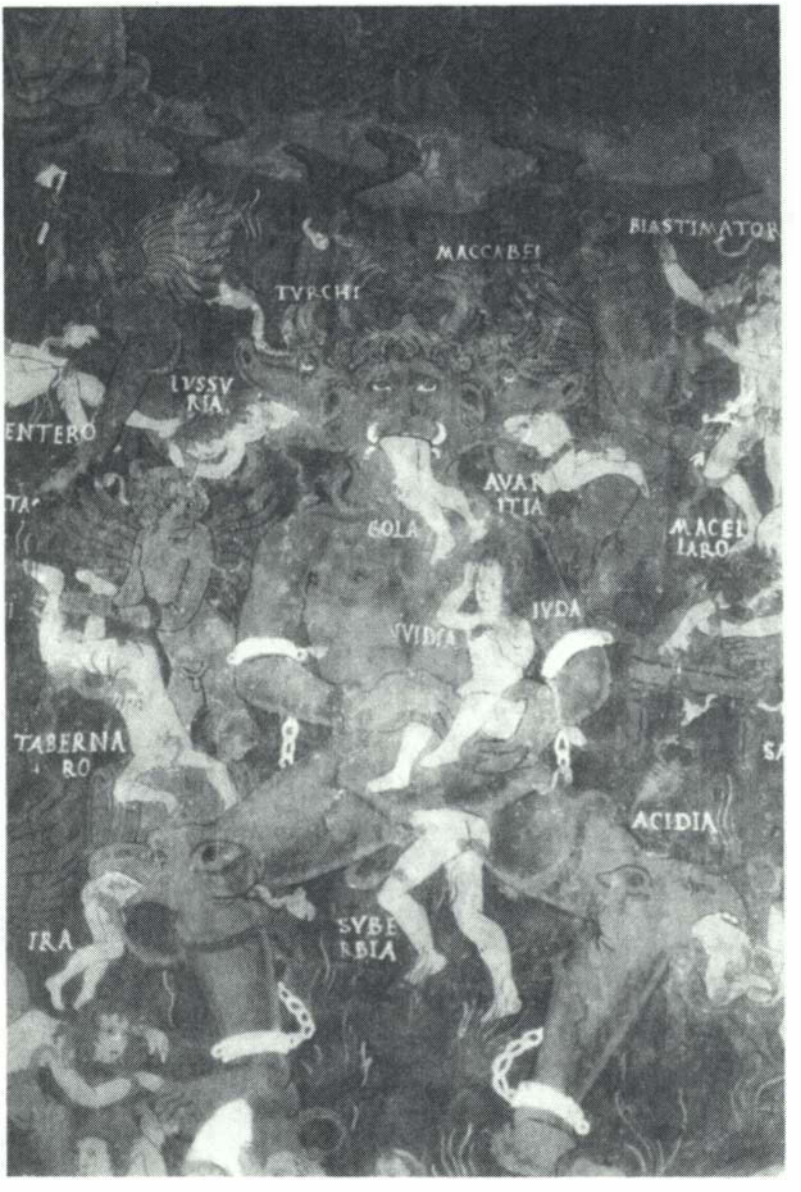

Figure 14. Satan punishing the seven deadly sins. This fresco shows the tendency for the number of ancillary faces and mouths on the devil's body to multiply. The sinners in this fresco are labeled with the seven deadly sins all punished directly by the Devil. The figure cradled in the devil's arms is labeled both "Judas" and "Envy." Fresco by an unknown artist, c. 1488. Pereto: Santa Maria dei Bisognosi. Photo by Richard S. Cohen.

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM

The human body appears to be the most comfortable and natural of things, a given that enables communication because it is a shared ground of human experience. Yet the body is also a cultural artifact, laden with symbolic associations both explicit and implicit. On the one hand, the female body sometimes was represented as able to take on a likeness to God: the stigmata, facial transfigurations, and other surface signs of divine possession could indeed transfigure the female visionary's body into a physical *imago Dei* before the eyes of her devotees. Yet the existence of a set of broader norms derogating and demonizing female physicality suggests that a view of the female body as a site for indwelling divinity was a transgressive view, one that flowed counter to the main currents of the culture. Indeed, women more commonly were viewed as an *imago diaboli*. This chapter has explored a portion of the rugged symbolic terrain associated with male and female bodies in the Middle Ages. I have charted a complex topography, in which the female is associated with weakness, irrationality, impressionability, the sinful senses, porosity, and the demonic; and the male with strength, reason, self-independence, moral understanding, impermeability, the angelic, and the image of God. According to these broad patterns of thought, which spanned several cultural areas, the male body was fundamentally more resistant to spirit possession than the female, which lay open to spiritual infiltrations of various kinds.

It now is time to turn from surface to depth, from porosity to interior bodily systems. Where did these possessing spirits go, once inside?

Brought to you by | New York University
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/10/17 9:04 PM